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## Understanding the functionality of housing-related support services through mapping methods and dialogue

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## Highlights

- The use of multiple activities at the workshops facilitated knowledge.
- By using visual stimuli, in-depth and nuanced information was accessed.
- Existing relationships of the research team contributed to recruitment success
- Building networks with other participants' improved knowledge of resources.
- Diverse representation, power differentials, and space issues need consideration.

## Abstract

This article describes the experience and process of using community mapping as a tool for collecting data on the functioning of housing-related support services in Metro Vancouver. We outline our mapping methods and discuss strengths and challenges encountered during workshops aimed at understanding how the system of housing-related supports function. Strengths were that workshops provided a forum for social participation and engagement. In addition, mapping is a research tool that enables local knowledge of service functioning and service gaps to be accessed and exchanged. Challenges include ensuring diverse representation; reducing power imbalances; and having adequate space to accommodate interested participants.

**Keywords:** community mapping; community-based participatory research; qualitative research methodologies; housing services; social services

## **Understanding the Functionality of Housing-Related Support Services through Mapping**

### **Methods and Dialogue**

Community mapping is a research method that aims to tap into and expand the breadth of knowledge and experience within communities in order to empower them to develop their capacity to deal with issues and problems (Water Aide, 2005). This approach enables researchers to engage the public in participation to acquire and integrate expert knowledge within communities and generate new understandings of innovative, sustainable, and inclusive community development (Minkler, 2004; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Moreover, mapping methods are applied to better understand the value that people attribute to different places, including efforts to inform policies around land management and natural resources (Besser, McLain, Cervený, Banis, & Biedenweg, 2014). Methods for mapping have variously involved geographic information systems (GIS) or blank sheets of paper (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Bethel et al., 2011; Elwood, 2006).

One rationale for conducting mapping workshops is the ability of these methods to uncover a depth and breadth of information that is not possible through survey methods (Besser et al., 2014; McLain, Banis, Todd, & Cervený, 2017). Taking this goal as our starting point, we conducted a series of workshops that used maps as reference points to discuss housing-related support service availability and functionality among research participants. Housing-related support services help individuals to attain and sustain housing, and could range from benefits applications and life skill development to case managers and advocacy (Government of Canada, 2014). Group workshops were chosen over one-on-one interviews so that shared understandings could be identified and participants could learn from one another. The aim of this paper is to describe the strengths and challenges of the community mapping method using findings to

demonstrate its use and effectiveness for uncovering nuanced information that is less easily generated using other methods.

### *Research Context*

Regarded by Canadian and U.S. federal governments as an evidence-based strategy to ending homelessness (Government of Canada, 2014; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015), Housing First has been found to increase housing stability and improve quality of life for program participants (Chung et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2013). As a result, Housing First has become a primary initiative in Canada and the U.S. in the provision of permanent independent housing to individuals who are experiencing homelessness who have multiple barriers to housing, such as mental health problems and substance use disorders (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). While Housing First implementation can vary between programs, all require: (1) immediate access to housing, regardless of readiness; (2) consumer choice and self-determination; (3) a recovery-orientated approach, including harm-reduction strategies; (4) individualized and person-driven supports; and (5) social and community integration (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013; Kennedy, Arku, & Cleave, 2017; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). Under the Housing First model, services are separated from housing though sufficient access to housing-related support services and resources is recognized as essential for successful Housing First delivery (Kennedy et al., 2017; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004). Whether comprehensive support services are available in different regions is unknown.

While it is acknowledged that scarce housing, in Metro Vancouver and other urban centers in North America, has proven a significant challenge for gaining access to immediate housing (Eberle, Kraus, & Serge, 2009), limited information is available on the adequacy of housing-related support services. Despite service listings on various online platforms or in print,

there is no formal documentation that describes the extent to which these resources are (un)available or (in)accessible. Though the Housing First model outlines the need for sufficient housing-related support services, the resource variability between regions and client groups can challenge the intended delivery of this model. To date there has been a limited understanding of housing-related support service delivery, particularly in terms of whether there are some regions or client groups in Metro Vancouver that lack necessary housing-related support services. This is further complicated as Metro Vancouver operates within 21 municipalities, one Electoral Area, and one Treaty First Nation and is served by two health authorities, and five law enforcement agencies, resulting in a severe division of responsibilities across these areas and challenging a coordinated systems approach to Housing First in Metro Vancouver. The current study engaged 13 distinct community units to understand the housing-related support services and resources available within communities.

### **Community-Based Participatory Research Approach**

In order to inform recommendations to improve housing-related support delivery, and thus Housing First, we engaged in community-based participatory research (CBPR) to understand the housing-related support system as it currently exists. Based on previous CBPR projects (Fang et al., 2016), we utilized community mapping as a tool to elicit information on how the housing-related support service system functions for 10 different communities (geographic-based) and for 3 different populations (population-based). Though the aim of all workshops was the same—to understand support service functionality—the order of activities in the geographic- and population-based workshops varied slightly. Accordingly, mapping was conceptualized not as the end product, but as a knowledge development tool—one that stimulates discussion around a topic of interest.

CBPR advocates for the use of a partnership approach to research that utilizes the expertise of various partners (Israel et al., 2005). Drawing on the key principles of CBPR (see Table 1) and community mapping methods, this study sought to engage research participants (e.g., service providers, service recipients) in rich conversations of housing-related support service functionality. As a result, the knowledge produced for this study benefited both the research participants and the research team. On the one hand, the workshop data informed the project's not-for-profit partner organization's recommendations to improve housing-related support service delivery in Metro Vancouver. On the other hand, workshop participants were able to build relationships and learn from one another about available housing-related support services.

Project partners were engaged throughout project planning, development, implementation, and dissemination of results (Israel et al., 2005). The authors (who are current or former academic researchers in the [*details withheld for peer review*]), collaborated with two community organizations, a non-governmental organization (NGO) of shelter and outreach providers within Metro Vancouver, and a regional information and referral (I&R) service organization. Though the project was initiated and led by the NGO, the research team was led by the academic researchers and was comprised of representatives from both the NGO and I&R organization, each with foundational roles in all stages of the research. An advisory committee was also formed, inclusive of a person with lived experience of homelessness and service providers, to guide this research and provide critical feedback on our methods and findings. In their role in the not-for-profit housing sector, the manager of the NGO identified a need for understanding how the housing-related support service system functions across the Metro Vancouver region (in 10 distinct communities; see Figure 1), as well as for specific demographic

groups that have unique vulnerabilities and challenges in receiving support services (seniors, women, and youth). Thus, this research is a direct response to a community-identified research question.

Early research meetings established defined roles and responsibilities for each of the project partners, both for the overall project and for data collection and reporting. For the overall project, academic researchers provided research expertise and developed an end-of-project recommendations report (Canham et al., 2016); the I&R organization developed a website to host a map searching function able to identify services throughout Metro Vancouver; and the NGO created 13 different geographic- and population-based profiles. The NGO was responsible for securing workshop catering and venue rental and participant recruitment; the academic researchers acted as facilitators and note takers during the workshops, managing the data collection and analysis; and various I&R organization staff attended the workshops to note take and assist as needed. The workshops took place in different community venues across Metro Vancouver that were accessible to participants and situated in the geographic region under investigation.

### *Diversity in Workshop Participants*

Participants were recruited by a project coordinator in the NGO who sent email invitations to members of private mailing lists maintained by the NGO, as well as community service providers listed in the I&R organization's services database. Targeted emails and follow-up phone calls were made by the project coordinator to encourage participation among service providers who serve in specific geographic regions or who serve seniors, youth, or women. For instance, senior-serving providers were explicitly recruited for the senior services workshop, and providers who operate in the City of Burnaby were recruited for the Burnaby region workshop.

In total, 215 participants (see Table 2) attended one or more of the workshops (the 10 geographic-based workshops had 10–31 participants, and the 3 population-based workshops had 16–19 participants). Service provider participants included local stakeholders with a vested interest in Housing First and housing-related support services throughout Metro Vancouver, and included representation from government agencies, housing associations, community centers, charitable organizations, and health authorities concerned with housing and service planning. Service recipient participants were individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Though provider participants were urged to bring their clients to the workshops so there would be participant diversity and a range of local specialized knowledge and perspectives could be gained in recognition that knowledge holders are key to the success of workshops (Chambers, 1994; Israel et al., 2005), client participation was limited.

### **Structure of Mapping Workshops**

With the overarching aim to understand the system functioning of housing support services in different geographic regions and for different sub-populations, workshop participants were engaged through flexible methods structured slightly different for the geographic-based and population-based workshops. Table 3 describes each stage of the mapping workshops and the affiliated objectives, activities, and outcomes. Upon arrival to the workshop, participants sat at a self-selected table; also present at each table was a member of the research team who facilitated the discussion and a note taker. The number of tables at each workshop varied (between 2 and 4), depending on the space available in the room and the number of participants who were in attendance.

All 4-hour workshops opened with a co-presented introduction to the full group, outlining the day's agenda, project background, objectives, and goals. Research ethics were explained to



participants by the academic researchers during this introduction and informed consent was collected from all participants prior to data collection. During this overview, the research team situated themselves as learners and participants were encouraged to engage in open-minded, non-judgmental discussions (Chambers, 1994). Following informed consent, audio recorders were turned on and the small table groups separately engaged in introductions, whereby each participant and researcher spoke in turn to identify themselves and one useful service in their community. This provided an opportunity to give equal voice to all participants' experiences of accessing housing-related support services for oneself or for a client.

The geographic-based workshops included four activities: a small group community mapping activity; a full group 'magic wand' activity; a small group service gap activity; and a full group wrap-up discussion. The population-based workshops included: a small group case discussion activity; a combined small and full group community mapping activity; and a full group 'magic wand' activity and wrap-up discussion. In all workshops, lunch was provided between the first and second activity and, as needed, participants took breaks. The varied workshop activities were designed to provide an opportunity for both small and large group conversations, as well as networking for participants. At the conclusion of all workshops, participants were asked to complete an evaluation survey to rate the workshop, describe what they might have learned, and offer additional comments. From the 13 workshops, 200 of the 215 participants completed a survey.

Though the order of activities in the geographic- and population-based workshops varied slightly, the overarching goals were the same: to give voice to participants and their experiences of navigating housing-related support services; to stimulate discussion and participant networking; and to collaboratively identify perceived facilitators and barriers to these services.

To enhance the richness of the workshop data, researchers documented key observations from each workshop in field notes and reflexive summaries.

### *Case Discussion Activity*

As the first activity for the population-based workshops, the research facilitator at each table presented a hypothetical case example that had been developed by the research team prior to the workshop (see *article blinded for review*) to the small table group to initiate discussion. Different case examples were developed for each of the population-specific workshops based on an amalgamation of a number of real-world experiences that were either youth-focused, senior-focused, or women-focused. The case examples were presented as a way to ground the discussion and to identify key issues and specific services and resources needed by hypothetical clients. Prompting questions from facilitators during this activity included: What services and supports would this senior/woman/youth need in order to establish or maintain housing? What difficulties are there in using these services and supports? What would help the senior/woman/youth access services and supports in the community? Where are there gaps in service provision? This activity enabled rich dialogue on the various challenges clients might encounter in finding and accessing housing-related support services. Participants were probed to describe how this case was similar to or different from their lived experiences and to provide other examples. These discussions primed participants for the activities that followed, giving them a concrete real world example to reference and a starting off point for subsequent conversations.

### *Community Mapping Activity*

The mapping activities at the geographic- and population-based workshops varied depending on the focus of the service region under consideration. For the geographic-based

workshops, the research team chose a single predefined geographic region to display on several large printed maps (50 x 50 inches). Distinct municipal regions were selected and maps were centered on service-rich areas within the different municipalities. This resulted in 10 different mapped regions (one for each geographic-based workshop). At each geographic-based workshop, all tables were provided with the identical map of the local area. The research team deliberately imposed geographic boundaries on the maps so that the small groups would have uniformity and common ground while they worked simultaneously at different tables. For population-based workshops, participants had come from municipalities across Metro Vancouver to discuss the issues of distinct sub-populations (seniors, women, or youth) and so one geographic map from each of the 10 regions was hung on walls throughout the room. Rather than focus on services within a specific geographic region, the focus was on population-specific services. Though the boundaries of the mapped area were pre-defined, participants were encouraged to map services and supports they felt went beyond these boundaries, when appropriate. At all workshops, participants did, indeed, identify and map resources off the edges of the map, including online and print-only resources.

During the workshops, participants directed the mapping process and by placing sticky notes on the pre-printed maps, generated visual representations of where housing-related support services and resources were located in their community. While participants of the geographic-based workshops worked together in small groups (of 6-8 participants), participants of the population-based workshops generally mapped individually or in pairs, focusing on the geographic map(s) with which they were the most familiar. During this activity, researchers facilitated discussions around how the services function in different regions through probing questions. Example questions included: What services and supports are available? What

difficulties are there in using these services and supports? What is helpful in accessing these services and supports? Participants were prompted to identify barriers and facilitators for accessing housing-related support services and voice their experiences of using these services as well as system gaps and weaknesses. This activity served as an interactive method for participants to describe how resources are distributed and function (e.g., accessibility, waitlists, hours of operation) across municipal regions and to network and share knowledge of community resources and services.

### *Magic Wand Activity*

Inspired by De Bono's (1992) provocation technique of wishful thinking to support creative idea generation, and to actively engage participants back into the dialogue after the lunch break, we used a magic wand activity to elicit what housing-related support services participants perceived as lacking, but necessary, in their communities. Participants were first instructed to work independently to avoid censorship, inhibition, or self-doubt. Second, participants were asked to produce six ideas because it is generally easy to come up with three ideas, but requiring additional ideas encourages creative ideation. Third, the magic wand metaphor was used to release participants from having to generate ideas that are feasible. While feasibility is important for moving ideas into action, creative thinking and idea generation are facilitated when constraints of the day-to-day are removed.

Participants were asked: "If you had a magic wand, what six Housing First services or resources would you add to your community that would meet clients' needs?" Participants wrote their replies on notecards and then researchers facilitated a large group discussion by asking each participant to read aloud one item from their notecard to the large group. Probing questions during this activity included: Where are there gaps in service provision? What is done when

resources are unavailable? This provided an opportunity for the cross-pollination of ideas between the tables and another opportunity for participants to network with one another. Further, this activity highlighted the services that participants felt were most needed and, thus, the research team was able to uncover opinions on service gaps. In other words, by getting participants to indicate services and resources they would like to add to their communities, it primed discussions around the existing gaps in service provision.

To conclude the workshop, one researcher facilitated a full group wrap-up discussion around the themes that had emerged from the individual tables over the course of the workshop. This provided a final time for participants to interact and network around shared understandings of the workshop themes.

### **Workshop Successes**

This paper responds to the prediction by Perkins (2007) that the significance of community mapping will increase and our hope is that our experiences can offer a guide for those interested in employing similar methods to access localized information in innovative ways. Indeed, this research demonstrates the utility of using mapping workshops as a tool for more deeply understanding the functionality of housing-related support services across geographic regions and specific populations within Metro Vancouver, but could similarly be applied to other communities that have similar goals. For instance, for addressing other challenges of marginalized persons, such as food security or access to healthcare. Moreover, the use of population-based workshops to identify service needs and gaps specific to various populations of interest (e.g., seniors, youth and women as we did), can be extended to other populations for which research teams want to develop specific recommendations for improving

and advancing services and policies. This is particularly practical when funding and ministries are organized for a specific population, such as the Ministry of Children & Family Development.

The use of multiple activities at the workshops generated detailed understandings of how the system of housing-related support services functions within Metro Vancouver. Moreover, the use of small and large group activities facilitated knowledge exchange between participants (and researchers). As one participant reflected on the visual benefits of the mapping workshops on an evaluation survey, “The process was helpful; the visual map is very helpful.” Other participants agreed that mapping “works with different learning styles” and helps to visualize that “many services are cluttered in specific areas (especially low-income).” By using visual stimuli, these workshops offered ways of accessing more in-depth and nuanced information from participants than would have been possible through interviews or focus groups. For instance, one participant was able to reflect on the distance between service locations and the hospital, which they had not previously considered, “What I find interesting looking at the map is where [the hospital] is and then where all the senior services are—it’s all away from [the hospital]. I don’t know if that’s just where real estate was.”

Similar to our experience, previous studies that have utilized mapping methods have found strength in having well-defined and focused goals for participants from the outset of the workshops, as well as strong community relationships (McLain, Donohue, Brunelle, & Selin, 2016). The benefit of being able to draw on the existing community relationships of all members of the research team, along with the broad network maintained by the NGO and I&R organization, contributed to our success in recruiting 215 participants to 13 workshops in 4 months. The expert facilitation skills of the academic researchers were complemented by the applied content knowledge of the NGO, and the availability of the I&R organization volunteers

to support the workshops and note take was a particular strength that enabled more diversity within the research team and the collection of rich data. As one participant commented on an evaluation form, “Very interesting conversation. Well organized. Excellent facilitation.” In contrast to McLain et al. (2016) who were challenged by “intermittent volunteers,” our study was well-supported and a success, in part, because of the I&R staff who volunteered as note takers at workshops. Potentially, their experience as professionals in the I&R sector provided them with the skills needed to best assist our study. Moreover, the experience of engaging directly with the community was valued and motivating for volunteers.

Earlier research has suggested that community mapping be used as a tool to encourage collaboration as well as dialogue and relationship building among participants (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005). Participant evaluations of the workshops identified this strength, noting the value in having been able to network with service providers who they can engage with following the workshop as they seek housing-related support services for themselves or for clients. As summarized by one participant, the workshops were a “great way to meet other service providers that are related directly to the same area.” The opportunity for service providers to network was consistently highlighted: “I liked meeting with people from other organizations. I liked the relationship building and exchanging of numbers/cards.” By supporting relationship building among service providers, the workshops improved service delivery to the clients of these providers.

As proposed by Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005), our mapping workshops served as more than a research tool as they engaged and empowered participants whose individual and collective voices were respected and valued. Community mapping, indeed, has the ability to give voice to otherwise marginalized voices if conducted appropriately (Perkins, 2007). At the

beginning of each workshop, the research team positioned the participants as the experts and the researchers as the conduit for report writing. In doing so, we sought to develop trust and an empowering space from the outset of the workshop. Despite these many successes, there were a number of challenges and lessons learned during the four months of conducting the workshops.

### **Lessons Learned**

While some of the challenges met early on in the project could be addressed at subsequent workshops, other challenges were less able to be resolved, but should be considered for future research endeavors. The primary challenge was ensuring that the right people attended the workshops and contributed to the dialogue. Service providers made up the greatest group of participants at all workshops, and though they were encouraged to support and bring persons with lived experience to every workshop, this was not always accomplished. As one participant acknowledged in their evaluation: it “would be great to have people with lived experience paid to be here to privilege their voices.” Other participants agreed; one who stated: “This would be great if more community members and government employees would have been a part of this conversation.” Future workshops should include service providers (who know about the available services), clients (who have lived experience of accessing services), and decision makers (who are able to effect action). While the research team discussed methods of supporting more clients to attend workshops, there was a limited budget and an inability to pay honoraria to participants. Ultimately, the NGO felt that client recruitment was most effective if done with the assistance of providers who could properly support their clients’ attendance and comfort at the workshops. However, future research should explore the ability to recruit clients more directly by posting flyers in community locations.



While the workshop participant composition should be diverse in order to gain a wealth of perspectives, a second challenge results from the power dynamics inherent in the social service sector. Of importance to the success of our workshops was the need for expert facilitation of group conversations so that the voices of persons with lived experience were recognized and given equal (or more) weight than those of professionals. In doing so, the inherent power imbalances between service provider and service recipient were managed. Beyond power are the different agendas that participants may bring to the table, spoken and unspoken, that invisibly influence discussions. For example, at one workshop, there were city council members in attendance for half of the workshop. When they left the workshop after lunch, the tone of the conversation with the remaining participants shifted to be more critical of not just policy and funding issues, but also of the availability and accessibility of services. Future research should consider conducting separate workshops for providers and clients in order to reduce potential power imbalances and build honoraria dollars into the project budget in order to support the voices of persons with lived experience. Service providers who are attending as part of their employment (or voluntary activity) may find it easier to plan to attend a workshop, while attendance for clients might be a spontaneous decision. The inclusion of more clients might require a more opportunistic approach to participation.

A final challenge for some of the workshops was that the size of the rooms booked was too small to accommodate the number of interested participants. For example, one workshop was held in a community setting where persons with lived experience were located (i.e., a local shelter), saw the workshop set-up and registration, and wanted to sign-up to participate in the workshop on the spot. While we were able to accommodate several interested drop-in participants, there were others who were unable to join due to space restrictions. Thus, the voice

of these persons went unheard. However, a benefit of the location was that it was central and relevant to participants. In locations where there is high-demand for participation, the research team should consider the potential for a follow-up workshop, though this was not possible based on the budget of the current project. Despite the limited room size for a few workshops, each of the workshops was conducted in a local community setting, including community centers and libraries, which provided close and familiar locations for participants.

## **Conclusion**

Mapping workshops provide opportunities for participants to situate themselves within a community and visualize prospects for active, meaningful engagement. In this study, the mapping activities resulted in improved understandings of housing-related support service functionality, while capturing participants' diverse descriptions and understandings of resources between and within communities (see Canham et al., 2018). Communities have to be able to identify evidence of their needs when advocating for support, or can be challenged in obtaining the resources needed for programs such as Housing First to succeed. For instance, the findings from this project were needed to assist organizations understand how the service system functions for specific communities in order to improve the capacity of housing-related support service delivery. Mapping methods serve as a useful tool that facilitates dialogue among community members about local services and supports, which helps service providers and stakeholders to understand and advance their functionality.

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Figure 1. Ten Regions in Metro Vancouver where Geographic-Based Workshops were held

